

Myth 5

‘Information on the dangers of drugs prevents drug use’

It is commonly assumed, that spreading information on the danger of drugs helps to prevent drug use, and thus supports the health and wellbeing of youth. This fact sheet aims to discuss the complex ways in which the information we receive, and all the messages we encounter via different forms of media, influence our attitudes, values and behavior - also with regard to substance use. It also aims to show how much more than just spreading information is needed for preventing drug use. In fact spreading messages on dangers of drugs can even lead to opposite outcomes as it can increase curiosity and experimentation with drug use, or in the other hand increase stigmatization of those already using drugs.

Media and pop culture influence our perception and attitudes

In our everyday life media surrounds us as we listen to radio, read the news, watch television, hear or see advertisements, surf the internet and connect to others via the various forms of social media. Media creates meanings in various ways, and tries to make us believe in them.

Messages delivered by media influence our perceptions, and also our perceptions on drugs. Sometimes the messages spread via media coincide with the scientific knowledge, and sometimes not. Especially advertisements might emphasize commercial interest above factual correctness. In countries where advertising for alcohol or tobacco is illegal, the companies might use indirect marketing strategies, such as marketing other product of that same brand, like non-alcoholic beer for example. Sometimes the companies use also product placement, and display their products in movies, television programs or in video games.

Why are we so affected by media?

In order to persuade, a variety of techniques is used. For example, flattery, repetition, superlatives, associations, symbols, humor, celebrities, and charisma. As a result we make a mental association with an emotion, a feeling or a desire, and a specific product or brand. Advertisers try to connect a good feeling to their product hoping that once the potential customer is in the store the same feeling will reproduce and the customer will choose their product. Media has the power to affect us all and that is why media is such a huge business.

Also movies, TV shows and music videos are capable of sending us messages on various substances and even on illicit drugs. These messages are also often not in line with scientific understanding of drug use, and for example the negative long term consequences of substance use are seldom presented, or sometimes the negative consequences are presented as the fault of the individual, and substance use is associated with moral or ethical failings.

Thus the messages in these movies, songs, advertisements or other media products we see have often underlying meanings, so-called “sub-texts”, that may influence our perceptions and attitudes. We are not necessarily aware of these sub-texts, unless we stop and analyze them.

Still, spreading information is not enough for preventing drug use

Having information on the consequences of certain behaviors is generally not enough to help to actually change those behaviors. For changing our behaviors we need also other help, such as skills, favorable environment, norms, intentions and attitudes, and that is why good prevention interventions target the multiple resilience and vulnerability factors beyond awareness, and for example support the learning of various life-skills, or parenting-skills, or aim at providing favorable and supporting environment e.g. via promoting access to good quality education or changing the norms and policies in schools.

Receiving specific information on drugs before the age of initiation, when young persons or children are not really aware of those drugs, might in reality be even counterproductive and just increase curiosity. Similarly, using ‘scare’ tactics and disseminating information on the dangers of drugs with graphic images or other material provoking emotions, might just feel unconvincing for those already encountering substance use in their lives, as especially the short term effects are often not so radical, and might alienate the receivers from any further health promotion activities. Among those who have no experiences on substance use, such messages might just increase negative attitudes towards substance users. Among those already using substances such messages might provoke difficult emotions and feelings of exclusion, especially if substance use is portrayed as ‘individual choice’ or even as sign of moral or ethical failing. Thus providing information on the negative consequences of drug use, especially when provoking strong emotions and using so called scare-tactics, is not effective, and raises often important ethical considerations as well. ¹

How to use media campaigns for preventing drug use?

- ✓ Aim at changing cultural norms about substance abuse and its ‘normality’, and/or educating about the short term consequences of substance abuse in a neutral manner, and/or suggesting practical strategies to resist substance abuse, and/or supporting self-efficacy relating to not abusing substances;
- ✓ Design messages for a specific target group, and try to achieving adequate exposure over time;
- ✓ Consider targeting parents, as this appears to have an independent effect also on the children;
- ✓ If you target those already experimenting with substances, include information on where to seek help (if good quality counselling, treatment, or rehabilitation services or cessation support is available in your community).

UNODC International Standards on Drug Use Prevention:
<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/prevention/prevention-standards.html>

International Journal of Psychology (Volume 49, Issue 2, April 2014) Ruiter et al. Sixty years of fear appeal research: Current state of the evidence: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24811876>

UNODC Youth Initiative Discussion Guide II: http://www.unodc.org/documents/drug-prevention-and-treatment/Discussion_guide_II_2012_12.pdf